

JOHN E. BIBY, JR.
1932 OLYMPIC GAMES
YACHTING



AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY
INTRODUCTION

Southern California has a long tradition of excellence in sports and leadership in the Olympic Movement. The Amateur Athletic Foundation is itself the legacy of the 1984 Olympic Games. The Foundation is dedicated to expanding the understanding of sport in our communities. As a part of our effort, we have joined with the Southern California Olympians, an organization of over 1,000 women and men who have participated on Olympic teams, to develop an oral history of these distinguished athletes.

Many Olympians who competed in the Games prior to World War II agreed to share their Olympic experiences in their own words. In the pages that follow, you will learn about these athletes, and their experiences in the Games and in life as a result of being a part of the Olympic Family.

The Amateur Athletic Foundation, its Board of Directors, and staff welcome you to use this document to enhance your understanding of sport in our community.

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AN OLYMPIAN'S ORAL HISTORY
METHODOLOGY

Interview subjects include Southern California Olympians who competed prior to World War II. Interviews were conducted between March 1987, and August 1988, and consisted of one to five sessions each. The interviewer conducted the sessions in a conversational style and recorded them on audio cassette, addressing the following major areas:

Family History

Date/place of birth; occupation of father/mother; siblings; family residence;

Education

Primary and secondary schools attended; college and post-collegiate education;

Sport-Specific Biographical Data

Subject's introduction to sport—age, event and setting of first formal competition; coaches/trainers/others who influenced athletic development; chronology of sports achievements; Olympic competition; post-Olympic involvement in sports;

General Biographical Data

Employment history; marital history; children; communities of residence; retirement;

General Observations

Reactions and reflections on Olympic experience; modernization of sport; attitudes on and involvement with the Olympic Movement; advice to youth and aspiring athletes.

Interview transcripts were edited and may include additional material based on subsequent conversations and/or subject's own editing.

JOHN E. BIBY, JR.

1932 OLYMPIC GAMES - LOS ANGELES
EIGHT-METER YACHTING CREW
Gold Medalist

INTERVIEWED:

March, 1988
Newport Beach, California
by George A. Hodak

JOHN E. BIBY, JR.

Interviewer: George A. Hodak

Hodak: Today I have the very good fortune to be at the Balboa Yacht Club in Newport Beach, California, interviewing John Biby, who was a member of the 1932 U.S. Olympic team on the eight-meter yachting squad. Before we get to the 1932 Olympics, I'd like to have you go into some detail on your family background. You can begin by telling me when and where you were born and then tell me a little about your parents.

Biby: I was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1912. As far as my parents are concerned, my mother's family traced their roots back to Peter H. Burnett, who was the first governor of California. My father was born in Southern Illinois, in the town of Pinckneyville, where his father had a farm. He left there in the early 1900s to come to California and go to law school at USC. He was successful there and went into law practice and made quite a reputation for himself. He ultimately became the bar association's chairman of their bar admissions group. In that capacity he would conduct the bar examinations.

The development of those bar examinations is kind of interesting because when he took the bar examination in about 1907, he was only asked three questions verbally, one of which was to give the definition for torts. Anyone that knows law knows that that is a very simple question to answer. The other two questions, as he has told me, were equally as easy. When he became bar association chairman of the examination committee, he vowed that he was going to make the bar examination better reflect the knowledge of the law that was taught in our law schools. So he worked hard on it and developed the written examination, as well as the verbal. One of

the first questions he asked was to verbally recite the Preamble to the Constitution. This was a big stumbling block for a great many of the applicants.

I had two sisters; one older and one younger. Both of them attended Stanford University. I ultimately went to UCLA after graduating from Los Angeles High School in 1929. I also attended the University of Washington briefly. I graduated from UCLA in 1933 along with the first graduating class of the new campus group. We were the first people to have gone all four years at UCLA at the Westwood campus.

Hodak: So, as you grew up were you drawn to the ocean, boating or yachting?

Biby: Yes. Actually, I was drawn to boating and yachting much before that. From the time I was about 12 years old I was buying yachting magazines and reading about yachting, although I had never been on a yacht. My first experience on a yacht came about 1927. I never really realized why I had that longing to go to sea in small boats, but it's possible that I inherited some love of the sea from an old ancient predecessor in the family who lived in Liverpool, England. He had four coasting schooners which operated between Liverpool and Glasgow. It may be that this was the source of my love of sailing and boating, which I have followed since 1927.

Hodak: Tell me about your early involvement in yachting.

Biby: My first experience in sail boating was with the renowned Ben Weston, who was named one of the four best skippers on the West Coast in 1928. Ben didn't have a son but heard through his daughter, who was a friend of my younger sister, that I had a love of the sea and had never been boating. So he called me one Saturday morning and said, "Do you want to go down to the harbor?" So we took a trip to the harbor and looked at boats and whatnot. After that he asked if I'd like to go sailing. So shortly

after that I was racing in the R-class on the R-boat *Debra*, owned by Syl Spalding and skippered by Ben Weston. After a couple years in this boat I was fortunate enough to be invited to race with Owen Churchill—who we will talk more about later. Not only was Owen a great skipper to be with, he became quite a friend. We had the use of his boats, generally with his nephew, Bill Cooper, who was a good friend of mine. We would cruise to Catalina, spend a week at a time on the boat, and have a great deal of fun over there.

Hodak: At this time was there a wide range of yachting competition throughout Southern California?

Biby: No, we had about three fleets racing. One was ocean racing; one was the R-class, which is the 40-foot sloops; and the third class was the starboats, which had been racing since the '20s. Owen, incidentally, had starboat number 47, which is interesting to hear because they're still building starboats here in 1988. Of course, the rig has changed and the composition has changed. Where it was formerly a wooden boat it is now a fiberglass boat. But it is still a fine one-design class and it's still an Olympic class. I don't know how many boats they've built but it must be an awful lot.

Hodak: So at this stage, what sort of boats are we talking about?

Biby: Well, we had what they called the ocean racing class. There were only about 45 boats in Southern California back in the '20s that could do ocean racing. They'd frequently turn out 20-25 boats at a time in the races. The yachtsmen that did sail were what you might call ardent yachtsmen.

We also had some very large schooners in Southern California. The Spalding family had the 161-foot *Goodwill*. Morgan Adams had a large schooner that was about 135 feet. Don Lee, the Cadillac dealer, had the *Invader*, a large schooner. These schooners all had professional crews. On the Spalding boat, they would have a total

of 50 people on board when they raced. Incidentally, we had the pleasure of racing that boat some years later to Honolulu in a Transpac race. At that time I was one of the helmsmen on that 161-footer that flew 23,000 square feet of sail at a time with the spinnaker up. It was quite an exciting thing to handle.

The boats raced generally on courses around Catalina Island or around Santa Barbara Island or San Clemente Island. Or they had races around a triangular course off Long Beach Harbor, off the north breakwater and Point Fermin. We had many days when I raced on those boats too.

Hodak: And what of the design and the materials used?

Biby: They were all wooden boats with cotton sails. This was before the days of fiberglass and dacron. We had some interesting experiences with that. When we first raced the eight-meter *Angelita*, the Olympic boat, she had cotton sails. We had a half-ounce spinnaker. I don't think there was ever a time that we flew that spinnaker that we didn't rip that sail, because the cloth was just about like that of a cotton handkerchief, which is not very strong.

Hodak: So once the sail is ripped what do you do?

Biby: Well, you take some tape and tape it together until we got it to the sailmaker for repair. That spinnaker was all red, which is quite a sight.

Hodak: Were you affiliated with any yachting association at this time?

Biby: I wasn't at that time, except when we did come to the Olympic Games. I was given an honorary membership in the California Yacht Club for a year, the card of which helped me to get into any speakeasy in San Francisco when I went to law school. The first time I joined a yacht club was in 1949, when I joined the Alamitos Bay Yacht Club so we could race penguin dinghies. That was just after World War

II. During the war all the yachting activity was stopped except for bay sailing.

Hodak: There were a couple of established yachting associations or clubs in the '20s in Southern California?

Biby: Oh yes. In the '20s the primary one was the California Yacht Club. Later on, the Los Angeles Yacht Club came in. Then, shortly thereafter, clubs like Newport Harbor Yacht Club and Balboa Yacht Club were founded. We had a number of yacht clubs around. But the real growth in yacht clubs came after World War II. You've got to remember the '20s was just about the birth of organized racing. In the '30s it was the Depression and people couldn't build boats. The '40s was the war and the '50s was the postwar era when everybody wanted to get in the water and we really started developing boats.

Hodak: Okay, let's move back to the momentum that leads up to the Olympics and your development as a yachtsman. I'm curious as to what sort of talent you developed and what role you played on the—

Biby: On the *Debra* I had learned about every job there was on the boat. She was a smaller boat, of course, 38 feet long. She was a great heavy-weather boat. By the way, she is still on the water and sailing and still winning races in the antique or wooden boat classes. I saw her last summer at Catalina. But I raced for several years on the *Debra* and then joined the crew of Owen Churchill's *Angelita* in 1929. In 1932 we qualified for the Olympic Games. I worked just about anything that was required of me on the boat.

Hodak: And you qualified by defeating a boat skippered by Pierpont Davis.

Biby: Yes, that's true. It seems to me there was also a boat sailed by Owen Dresden, *Marin* was the name of the boat. *Marin* was an eight-meter design by Nick Potter, as was the *Angelita*. Owen's first eight-meter was *Babe*. I believe she was designed by

Burgess & Morgan on the East Coast and built in Holland and one of a group of about 22 one-design, eight-meters. When I say one-design, I mean that they were all alike. *Angelita* was not a one-design boat. You have to remember these boats were built to a rule that ended up in eight meters. The eight meters really didn't mean anything at all except it was the result of a formula and it had to come to eight meters. The formula encompassed things like sail area, length, water line, weight of the keel, ballast, and whatever else they had in the formula. I don't remember them all, it was very complicated. So the *Angelita* was designed to that rule and conformed to the rule but she was a much faster boat than the old one-design Burgess & Morgan boats.

Hodak: What sort of things would you want to point out about Owen Churchill, to give a feel for his personality and his leadership?

Biby: Owen was a wonderful chap to be with. He was a great friend. I can't talk highly enough about Owen's ability. He was very much committed to sailing. I should tell you that when he was at Stanford he was trying to persuade his family that he should take up flying. They didn't want him to take up flying so they suggested that he might like yachting. With that, he bought an interest in a large 50-foot sloop and he ultimately bought the whole boat, called *Galliano*. He raced her and cruised her for some years. Then he had a starboat, as I said before, the 47-foot *Maia*. After the *Maia* he had *Babe* which he raced in the 1928 Olympics on the Zuider Zee in Amsterdam.

After the 1932 Olympics in which he raced the *Angelita*, he went to Kiel, Germany, and raced the *Angelita* there. His best performance was in the 1932 Olympics. The *Angelita* was perhaps a medium-weather boat.

Hodak: Could you explain what you mean by a medium- and heavy-weather boat?

Biby: Well, design can be altered for light, medium or heavy winds. When you get into a heavy-weather boat you're talking about boats that do well in over 18 knots. A medium-weather boat might do well from 10 knots up to 18 knots. A light-weather boat might do well in 12 knots or under. So there is some overlapping. Essentially, the mid-point of any of those ranges would really permit one of those boats to stand out in the crowd. As the *Angelita* was designed for Los Angeles Harbor weather, she was pretty much a medium-weather boat. When she went to Kiel, they found out that they had very heavy weather. So her [the *Angelita's*] sails were a little too slack and had a little too much curve in them. What you want in heavy weather is a very flat sail. The other boats had the flat sails that helped and were ballasted for heavy weather. So I think she finished about tenth in the German Olympics, against the first we had in the 1932 Olympics.

Hodak: Getting back to the 1932 Games, how was your crew assembled? Had you all been sailing with Owen Churchill?

Biby: Yes. Our regular crew had sailed with Owen Churchill and they primarily consisted of Karl Dorsey, better known as "Shorty"; Bill Cooper, Owen's nephew; Robert Sutton; and myself. But added on to that, Owen also requisitioned a back-up group; the crew of the second-place boat owned by his brother-in-law, Pierpont Davis, which included Pierpont, Dick Moore, and others. Owen was a wonderful chap—big hearted. He wanted to give the crew of the second-place boat a chance to get gold medals, if possible. What he did was rotate the crew. As we only participated in four races of the seven that were scheduled . . . why, I think I raced in two of the races and the crew was alternated all around. It didn't make much difference because we won all four races anyway.

Hodak: The weather didn't present any problem?

Biby: No. The weather was good, just right for us, probably 15 knots each day. It was fortunate that Owen was such a nice chap to give

these people a chance to get in there and win their gold medals.

Hodak: What is involved in the judging of a yachting competition? How would you explain it to somebody who isn't acquainted with the sport?

Biby: There is quite an elaborate set of rules that govern yacht racing. There are primary right-of-way rules and there are some that are less frequently used but they are invoked at times. It is a rather difficult and complicated subject to go into at any length unless we spend the rest of the afternoon talking about it, and I'd like to have the rule book in front of me when we did. But it's like right-of-way. If you're close-hauled in the wind, the starboard-tack boat has the right of way. If you are running off the wind, the overtaking boat has to keep clear of one that is being overtaken. Though the boat being overtaken can lough you into the wind, he can't lough you more than dead into the wind. So it goes on and on with all kinds of ramifications from that.

Hodak: These are the most common infractions?

Biby: The starboard tack rule is the one that is used more than anything. But many of them do involve running before the wind and how much loughing you can do or what rights a loughing boat has. And there are rules on rounding the marks, and it goes on and on. The book is quite thick.

Hodak: So, prior to the 1932 Olympics was there much talk of the yachting competition? Was this something that you had focused your attention on?

Biby: We were anxious to participate in it, of course. Owen had had experience in 1928 on the Zuider Zee in Amsterdam and had told us all about it and taken pictures. So we were well-primed for what we had to do. In those days, we didn't go into the training that they do today. We had a regular schedule of racing which generally went

every other weekend all winter, and close to every weekend all summer. We followed that the year before. Today, skippers and crews will devote 100 percent of their time for a full year to develop their racing ability and competitiveness. It is quite different today.

Hodak It parallels the development and progress of other sports.

Biby: Oh yes. You can compare the evolution of the sailboat to the evolution of the automobile. They've both come a long way since 1920.

Hodak As a member of the yachting team, were you wholly a part of the Olympics? Did you stay in the Olympic Village?

Biby: No, on the yachting team we did not stay in the Olympic Village, although we had access to it at all times. When we didn't race we went down to the Coliseum and watched the events that took place down there.

Hodak Any particular event or athletes that you met?

Biby: I really can't remember the names except for Eleanor Holm—she was a doll.

Hodak You did take part in the Opening Ceremonies?

Biby: Oh, yes, both Opening and Closing Ceremonies. We also had our trophies presented to us in the Coliseum, which was quite an emotional thing.

Hodak Were you able to meet with other yachtsmen from other countries?

Biby: Yes, we were able to meet with them. There were some Italians racing in another class and there were a couple of Scandinavian boats in other classes. The dinghy races drew a lot more competitors because they weren't handicapped by the financial

conditions of the Depression, which encompassed the world at that time. There were quite a number of foreign yachtsmen in the dinghy competition and we met them at several different events.

Hodak: How did people attend or view the yachting?

Biby: It was very difficult. Today, in that type of racing, the Olympic Committee will provide press boats and judges boats and perhaps even spectator boats for VIPs. But in those days, those things hadn't been thought of yet. The Olympics had to grow up some.

Hodak: Were you impressed by Los Angeles' preparations for the Olympics in the midst of the Depression?

Biby: The Olympic Village was really something. It was on top of the Baldwin Hills and it was quite a spot. Of course, the Coliseum was built some years before that . . . but it was a beautiful situation and a beautiful outlay for the Olympic Games.

Hodak: Did you receive a lot of attention in the form of media or press coverage?

Biby: Yes, we had a lot of press coverage. Of course, we didn't have television in those days and I don't think we were on radio. But there was a lot of newspaper and magazine coverage.

Hodak: Did you have thoughts of going to the 1936 Olympics?

Biby: Yes, Owen was going to take the boat to Kiel for the 1936 Olympics and I was going to be part of the crew. But, unfortunately, in 1935 my wife and I eloped to Las Vegas and were married and I had to start supporting her. In those days, women didn't work. She worked until six months after we were married and then she quit and has never worked since. (laughter)

Hodak: Tell me a bit about what you did following graduation. What did you

study in school and what direction did your career take following graduation?

Biby: Well, I was going to go to law school and I went up to Stanford and started in at law school. But temporary physical problems kind of interfered with that, and I had to drop out of law school. When they were finally corrected, I was married and working at Douglas Aircraft Company, where I started in as a timekeeper. By the end of World War II, I was controller of the Long Beach plant, which employed a little over 40,000 people at its peak during the war. After 17 years as controller there and at the Santa Monica plant, the home office, I went over to the space business at Huntington Beach to help them organize the plant. Because I had been president of the Long Beach Chamber of Commerce, I became the local government liaison. I worked with the government to develop the government-owned facilities that were needed around the plant, like roads and bridges and so on. Then, I finally left Huntington Beach after 10 years of pricing and negotiating government contracts with a staff of about 40 people. I retired in 1972 after 37 years at Douglas.

Hodak: Did you know Donald Douglas?

Biby: I knew Donald Douglas very well and he was a wonderful gentleman. I enjoyed knowing him very, very much.

Hodak: And he also was on the yachting team in 1932.

Biby: His boat was the American representative in the six-meter class. It was skippered by Ted Conant who worked for Doug and was an old friend of mine. Ted was another very wonderful gentleman and a very capable manager in the Douglas Aircraft Company.

Hodak: So you were in a good position to see Douglas Aircraft grow.

Biby: Oh yes. I joined Douglas in 1935 when the company had a total of

3,500 employees, and by the middle of World War II they had over 100,000. They peaked during the war at 160,000, as I recall. They had, I believe, six plants by the end of the war, some of which were government-owned. After the war, they bought the Long Beach facility and operated it privately.

Hodak: Along with your work, were you able to pursue racing as a hobby?

Biby: Yes, with both Don and Ted as racing enthusiasts it wasn't hard to get time off to go racing. But most of our racing was limited to weekends. In my own racing career after that, I raced with Donald Douglas, Jr. on what they called a California 32, which was a 16-foot sloop, in the immediate postwar years. We raced in things like the Lipton Trophy Race and the Ensenada race. After that I bought my own racing boat. It was what they called Pacific Class or a PC, a 32-foot, one-design sloop. I skippered that for about eight years and sold it and went into cruising with a minor amount of ocean racing, also in my own boats. I also raced in the 17-foot yawl *Typee* in the early '60s. We won the Mazatlan race the two years that I raced with Llewellyn Bixby on the *Typee*. That was in 1964 and '68. In '59 I raced on the schooner *Goodwill* in the Transpac. We did another Transpac on the *Typee* in 1969. The *Goodwill* was a 161-foot schooner and I was fortunate to be appointed one of the helmsmen, which was quite an experience with 20,000 square feet of sail up.

Hodak: Any particular highlights of your races? Any particular race or regatta you are most proud of?

Biby: Well, in my own PC I was very pleased that two years in a row I won a perpetual trophy put up by the PC-class by Newport Harbor Yacht Club in their Newport Harbor Summer Regatta. That was against 22 or 23 other boats in both those races. Later on, I went more into cruising than racing. Racing was kind of a little fun on the side.

Hodak: What things strike you as you look at modern Olympic yachting competition or yachting competition in general?

Biby: In 1984, our boat was what they call a stake boat for the Olympics off Los Angeles Harbor. I had a good chance to observe the yachting. There are so many more racing classes now. Unfortunately, the bigger boats are not used anymore. I believe the largest boat that they used was the 22-foot Etchells. They also had Solings, which are almost that large. They had starboats and the catamarans, which were smaller boats. Most of them were two-man boats and in the Solings there were three, as opposed to the *Angelita* that we raced on in the Olympics, which had a six-man crew and was 50 feet long. So that gives you something of the difference. But other than that, they both sailed.

Today the trimmer on larger boats is an individual and the skipper has little he can tell the trimmer, who knows as much as the skipper. So Dennis Connor sails and steers the boat. For instance, on the larger boats used today, the skipper will have specialists in each field.

When I first raced in the *Debra* we had no winches of any kind—that became very physical. Later on it became more a matter of precision. In the type of boats we were sailing, the skipper would call the turn of the sails; we were the muscle. The skipper would watch for the competition so he could determine the necessary tactics.

Hodak: Tell me about your family.

Biby: My wife became quite a sailor—she had to! She knew that before we were married. I now have a daughter, who is in the brokerage business. She and her husband have a powerboat. I have two grandsons and both have raced competitively in their own one-man boats. My two granddaughters have cruised with me but they haven't had any racing experience.

Hodak: Overall, how many children have you had?

Biby: I have two daughters and four grandchildren. I am very close to the grandchildren. I think I told you that two of them are coming down here to the club to have lunch with me on Friday. They called the other day and said they just wanted to come down and have lunch with us, so they're going to come.

Hodak: What sort of other interests and hobbies do you maintain today, outside of yachting and sailing?

Biby: My biggest hobby is still boating and I have a powerboat out here. But I also do some bicycling.

Hodak: Are you involved in UCLA alumni activities?

Biby: No, very few. But I am still quite a fan of the UCLA teams. I watch them on television every opportunity I have and sweat with them while they finally win . . . sometimes.

Hodak: More than sometimes. (laughter) I wonder if you have anything in the way of advice you'd offer, both to athletes and specifically to those involved in yachting and boating.

Biby: I think when I was 40 or 50 I would have had a lot of advice for people, but as I get older I have no advice for them because most of the young people are smarter than I am. (laughter) You should meet my grandsons. They are both at the university and they are really smarter than a whip. Jeff is in real estate development school at USC. He just was admitted the beginning of this semester. There's only 25 people in the school, so it is quite an honor to get into it at USC. He will spend a year and a half in that school before he graduates. We expect that by that time he will be fully qualified to work for a developer and perhaps after two or three years of that he'll be able to branch out on his own.

Hodak: Any summary thoughts on the significance sports has played in your life or the significance of being an Olympian?

Biby: I think there is one thing that I might comment on. I think that competition was a bigger part of our lives back in the '20s and '30s than it is today, for some reason or another. Yes, there is competition to get ahead in business, but in the '20s and '30s we started life in competition. We had games that we played all the time because we didn't have any other entertainment. You see, there was no television, no radio and things of that type. Radio came in around the '20s.

Hodak: Yes, in a rather primitive form.

Biby: As I recall, my father bought his first radio in the late teens or the early '20s. But we didn't sit around listening to radio, we went out and played softball or football or ran around the block. Anything we could compete in, we did. We had playgrounds where we could go and have competitive games of one kind or another. We were always trying to be a winner. Today, I don't see nearly as much of that.

Hodak: There certainly are a number of diversions today which might sap a competitive spirit.

Biby: That's true. In that respect, I think the old days were pretty darned good. However, I wouldn't trade them for today for anything.

Hodak: Do you have any thoughts on the '84 Olympics overall?

Biby: I have one thing to say about the '84 Olympics: They were beautifully staged. It was terrific. That Closing Ceremony was one of the most emotional things I ever hope to see.

I watched the '88 Winter Games all last week. The staging was

terrific. Of course, the sports were very much the same. People have made progress in all those sports . . . how much better they know how to train than in the old days. But that's just part of growing up.

Hodak: Well, I certainly want to thank you for the opportunity to come down and interview you. The Amateur Athletic Foundation is also extremely appreciative of your cooperation and we hope to see you at the Paul Ziffren Sports Resource Center, which is currently under construction so as to open in August. Thanks Mr. Biby for sharing your thoughts today. It's been a pleasure meeting you.

Biby: It's been a pleasure to talk to you, George.